

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **The Wild Ass' Skin / La Peau de Chagrin** (1831)

Honore de Balzac (1799–1850)

### OVERVIEW

*Author* He was of an artisan class family. From the beginning he was stubbornly insistent on doing things his way, following what he aspired to make into a successful business career. Underlying that set of ambitions, however, lay a refractory period of schooling, during which he seems to have spent as much time in the time-out chamber as in the classroom itself. (The young Balzac was a voluminous reader, and would spend his time outs in voracious reading, tackling any topic, from historical romance to chemistry to the constitutional history of France). Upon release from school he plunged into a sequence of would be professional careers. Meanwhile Balzac moved with his family to Paris, where, doubtless driven by the example of his father, Balzac plunged into making a brilliant intellectual out of himself. He enrolled at the Sorbonne, and threw himself into the distinguished lectures being offered by such as Victor Cousin, an eminent translator of Plato, Francois Guizot, later to be Prime Minister, and a Professor of Modern History, and Abdel Villemain, Professor of Classical Literature and French. Following in his father's prompting, the maturing Balzac fumbles through a wide variety of attempted careers. For a few years he worked in a law office—it was at this time that he indoctrinated himself in the wretchedness of human nature, writing in his early novel, *Le Notaire*, (1840), that the novice in the law sees the 'oily wheels of every fortune, the hideous wrangling of heirs over corpses not yet cold, the human heart grappling with the Penal Code.' In 1849 Balzac had had enough of faking a personality, and declared, to his family and friends, that he had decided to 'become a writer.' His family, dismayed at his decision, fixed him up with a humble garret room in Paris, and reluctantly freed Balzac into the 'writer's life.' It was in the aftermath of this decision, about his personal future, that Balzac proclaimed his destiny. In 1832, by a significant coincidence, Balzac saw the first notable success from his writing of fiction. The work was a fable-like fiction entitled *La Peau de Chagrin*, *The Wild Ass' Skin*, a fable like tale about a despondent young man who comes on a magic ass's skin in an exotic curiosity shop.

*Novel* Ancient Greek literature and criticism offer a steady reflection on the relation between character and action. The greatest Greek tragedians, like Aristotle whose Poetics provides the ancient world's sharpest literary criticism, seem at one in their sense that in the literary arts what you are is what you do. The novel before us exemplifies the Greek perspective. The establishment of a full personhood for Raphael is gradually achieved by the up layering sequence of events that create him. From the disconsolate figure who opens Balzac's tale by wandering into the twilight casino—who is in fact the very mood of the casino itself—to the suicidal figure whose mood is turned shortly after by a throng of witty merry makers, to the figure who discovers, several years later, that though he is wealthy he has lost his health, to, finally, facing the realization that his greatest weakness had been to accept the dangerous bargain posed to him by accepting the ass's skin from the proprietor of the curiosity shop. Character, in the case of Rafael, is dynamic and unfolding, and can perhaps be best understood in contrast to static character, one version of which, in the present instance, might be the stock character, who is statically fixed in himself, whose only life-act is to represent.

*Historical Background: The Novel as a Form* The novel is a long valued literary form, bringing together the subtle insights of the lyric with the bold energies of humans in action in their directly human guises. Significantly enough, however, the novel in its contemporary form—as a long discursive tale, packed with a multiplicity of human types—requires a kind of committed curiosity which is not easily available to the nerve driven post-industrial citizen of today's global metropolis. Balzac, writing in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France was active. one might say hyperactive, at a time when the reader and the writer were beginning to meet at peculiarly rich and complex intersections. Book shops were lining up along the banks of the Seine, bringing in avid readers, creating a new genre of flaneurs who were made for print entertainment, and drawing in, with them, a profusion of, book stores and cafes at which the bourgeois

with new found leisure could whet his imaginative curiosities. The ascent of the reader with sufficient leisure to pass the afternoon over coffee and a novel, coincided of course with a period of explosive power in French—also British and German—literature. The turn into the nineteenth century meant, for French and English literatures, radical new efforts to characterize the new socio cultural era brought in by economic industrialism. The novel was the natural vehicle for characterizing such changed social landscapes as those brought into Western European culture by the Industrial Revolution. Here we find the placing for Balzac, as well as for other stupendously undertaking novelists like Hugo, Flaubert, Dickens, or Dostoyevsky, and the invitation to account for the unique cachet Balzac brought to the depiction of the period of world shaping change.

## SCENES

**Entering Casino** The reader may be taken aback, from the start, by the timelessly out of time atmosphere into which he is introduced. A small band of casino addicts has gathered around a gaming table, in the dim light customary in such milieux. They are at the opening of their gaming day, and are rather surprised at who has entered their midst, who has undertaken this intervention into their atmosphere. The unknown stranger, who has entered their midst, has cast a somewhat eery mood over the dark room, whose time greasy wallpaper watches, full of its own tales, as the new comer steps into the vestibule of the gaming house. Balzac has created a tangible, mystique about the new arrival. His presence as registered by the individuals scrutinizing him in the space, the new entrant's uneasiness, is made the more evident by the intervention of the doorman, or should one say the hat man, who ceremoniously, and as if with the figure of death, collects and racks the hats of arriving gentlemen. We have been readied for the first pieces of action.

**Chance: A single gold coin** Steadily we have been under preparation for learning that the stranger has been fingering a single gold coin, with which he has been approaching the croupier. The audience is fixated, their own betting libido over for the day. The croupier opens the floor to bets, the five or six who are gathered around gasp with an unexplicit intensity, and as the croupier gathers in his results—no victory here—the chance taking late comer sucks in his breath and accepts his loss. How explicitly can we read out this 'throw of the dice?' No one can have misinterpreted the gravity of the situation at hand. The spectators could not have failed assuming that the young bettor's very life has been at stake. The room shuddered with doom, which in fact cast its shadow, as the croupier's throw marked off the young man's loss. Balzac mined his own earlier life, to come up with the raw materials of the present introduction to this novel at all points complicatedly interwoven with the author's own life. The author's actual youthful existence, which was seriously, father-dependent, and at many points precariously fragile, brought him up against the possibility of suicide, and pre set the stage for the kind of ultimate chance, on the brink of which we find him in this initial chapter.

**Loss** The Raphael whom we meet among the twilight gamblers is down to his last Napoleon, as we can surmise, and knows well that the River Seine, which is just outside the gambling establishment, could quickly solve all his problems. But that will not in fact be the line of the story. Raphael will in fact cast his bet and lose, and leave the hall. He will lose, but he will not at this point lose his life. The moment has in fact nearly arrived, when a bevy of revelers will pass Raphael, sweeping him along with their wit and merriment. That will be just after Raphael loses. It is as if the landscape will itself have joined in the transformation of mood and perception. Visually, after the croupier announces Raphael's loss, the narrator takes us with him down a profile of noble and history soaked structures—Notre Dame de Paris, The Palais Royale—leaving us to feel the shrinking dimensionality, and time embrace, of the characters occupying the early nineteenth century.

**Curiosity Shop** The grandeur of the pageantry of humanity was in fact deeply close to the world-awareness of Raphael as he skirted the charms of death, and strode into the Curiosity Shop. Swept away from the toxic threats of the gambling depression, Raphael found himself at the door of a true curiosity itself, exactly the species of human collectibles which befitted the curiosity appetites of a young man insufficiently distanced from the lethal tale being written for him at the time of his depression.. Now he was suddenly all curiosity himself.

**The Skin** His very reading and article writing, which would eventually eventuate into the *novel La Peau de Chagrin*. lay now In a scrapbook Balzac kept in the late twenties where he had made reference

to 'a skin which represents the world,' 'une peau qui represente la vie,' a 'conte oriental.' In a short story written at the time Balzac had imagined a depressed young man who had lost his last Napoleon in gambling, and had gone on to drown himself in the Seine. In short the shop standing before Raphael was a stage on the way of this day toward the self-portrait Balzac would extrapolate from the curiosity shop visit he was on the verge of taking under the guidance of a willing proprietor. The book he would derive, from his experience in the shop, was to be a rapid fire success, going through a third edition by March 1833. Balzac the author would reap a gratifying success, while Balzac the character carried through his fictive mission, coming out the back door of the curiosity shop clutching a thin stretched ass' skin, and having gaped meanwhile at the wonders of the collectible world.

**Talisman** The skin talisman, which Raphael is invited to take with him free of charge is offered to him by the curiosity shop's proprietor, with the observation that Raphael should follow all instructions that accompany the gift. It is here, of course, that the meaning of the tale sets in, the clear use of the philosophical bent, which Balzac honed at the Sorbonne under Victor Cousin. The skin will guarantee that every desire of its owner will be fulfilled, but at a cost. A philosophical moral is lodged in the ass' skin. Used to fulfill desires the skin can be exploited to the max, but crucial is first of all to learn that every satisfied desire is to be paid for in terms of a portion of the user's life force. Satisfaction of desire, in other words, entails an equivalent sacrifice of the strength of one's life. Power and the loss of it are intimately wrapped up with the magic skin, whose mysterious origins, as the proprietor of the shop explains, derive from that Middle Eastern and Central Asian zone into which French culture was at the time pouring public interest and archeological inquiry, expeditions. We are at a moment, in French Post-Napoleonic life, when the Outre-Mer elements of the new French culture are decidedly in vogue, and in which the mystique of the Peau would be maximally ready to find an attentive audience,

**Merrymakers** As Raphael leaves the curiosity shop, his mind is spinning, both from the amazing glories he has seen in the shop, and from an explosion of desires—for all his objects of longing—from the least to the most refined. Coincidentally, as he leaves the shop with the skin, he is overtaken by a crowd of merrymakers, some of them old friends, who talk him into joining them for a feast at the Palais Royal. In no mood to turn down pleasures, on a day when he has been close to suicide, Raphael hurries along with his friends, understandably under the spell of the skin he is carrying with him and of the complex, not yet fully comprehended, powers the skin conveys. The reader is only beginning to grasp the gift provided by the proprietor of the curiosity shop. In an era dominated by ideals of power—think of the lure of power at the heart of Goethe's *Faust*—think of the overwhelming drive behind Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*—and of concern with Will and Determination—think Nietzsche or Schopenhauer—one grasps immediately the volatility of what is put in Raphael's hands.

**The woman without a heart** *La Femme sans Coeur* is a flashback onto the second part of the trilogy that opens with *The Talisman*, and that will conclude eventually, in the final section, *Agony*; a flashback to the disconsolate Raphael, whose lifelong maladaptation will not abandon him. The section before us centers on a lengthy tale, told by Raphael to his friend Emile, about a case of unrequited misery, only narrowly holding him back from taking his life.

**Agony** The third section of the trilogy, *Agony*, returns us squarely to the issue of the talisman, which though briefly has passed through, inflected, and built itself into the central shaping faculty of the trilogy. Several years have passed, at this point. By this time Raphael has acquired a large fortune, but both the skin and his health are dwindling. For a time Raphael conceives the idea of getting rid of the skin, but he is unable. At this point, arguably the most devastating of the novel, Raphael begins to panic, seeing no way to divest himself of all desires, fearing that any desires will prove fatal to him. Without luck Raphael tries to escape from the skin by taking a vacation to Aix les Bains, then he settles into his country house, where he can live in solitude, nothing to arouse a desire in him. We know that at this point he has been driven nearly too far.

**The Last Passion: Pauline** He is visited in his rooms by an old flame, Pauline; she expresses her love for him. Her commiseration for Raphael is huge; she has come so suddenly to love and pity him. She is so intense, and his vulnerability so great, that he feels an overcoming rush of passion for her. His level of desire is extreme. This is of course a total red flag moment. Such a passion is clearly enough to exterminate Raphael, and Pauline, knowing this, takes action to try to save the man she has

come so suddenly to love. Action and violence take over the scene. Pauline races into the next room and locks the door, to prevent Raphael from throwing himself on her in passion. Raphael breaks down the door anyway, and throws himself on Pauline, in his life's last gasp of passion. He dies at once, the skin depleted.

## CHARACTERS

**Raphael** Raphael is, arguably, a non-character major character. From the time we first see him, entering the Palais Royal casino at dusk 'toward the end of the month of October, 1829 to his death in the arms of Pauline a few years later, Raphael remains subject to the winds of fate and passion, a spell which ultimately replaces his life. While the text that surrounds him falls under the rubric of realism, there is something about his life story that resembles a fairy tale. He is sensitive to the implications of destiny and acquiescent to the promptings of simple events.

**Literary parallel** Like Raphael, Goethe's Faust is faced with the dangerous opportunity to have his desires fulfilled. This opportunity is dangerous because he must pay for this wish fulfillment by selling his soul to the devil. He must put himself at the disposal of evil. Raphael gains the power inherent in the ass' skin, but exercising that power, satisfying his wish, he pays for it with his health and ultimately his life. Both texts are studies in desire and self possession.

**Rastignac** Rastignac appears when Raphael is narrating his life to Emile. Rastignac appears as an elderly acquaintance and supporter of Raphael. He moves in Raphael's social circle, advises him on navigating the ways of the world, and stands up for his younger friend. He is an aristocrat.

**Feodora** Feodora is attractively gorgeous but cold to Raphael, who is fascinated by her 'heartless' beauty. A foil to Paulina, who is warm and commiserating toward Raphael, Feodora is a glittering figure of high Parisian society. While not overtly corrupt, she breathes the air of high sophisticated compromise.

**Paulina** Paulina is passionately sympathetic to Raphael, eventually proving to be the source of his downfall. Having been a childhood buddy to Raphael, she is stunned to find him trapped in the deadly dilemma imposed by the 'skin.' In the end she awakens in Raphael a passion, which is fateful to her lover.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### RAFAEL

**Overview** In an early scrapbook Balzac made reference to a 'skin which fathoms the mystery of life,' and he attributes it to a 'conte oriental,' an Oriental tale. A week later he published a story about a young man who loses his 'last Napoleon,' a serious financial blow, and who immediately leaves a casino, and throws himself into the Seine to drown. Balzac broods over this nub of a tale before him. By July 1839 a slowly evolving text would be released, encouraged by the periodical publishing process, which dictated that parts of a text would be released periodically. An audience appetite would be aroused, to find out how an achieved state of textual affairs could be resolved. All of which gives some impression of the incremental fashion by which Balzac put together his first complete novel, *La Peau*, and well illustrates the stage by stage printing process that was becoming formative for the nineteenth century novel.

**Character** The key character, Rafael, emerges at an angle to the plot, and gathers in Balzac's earlier plot intimations. The character emergence is like this. A young man 'loses his last bottom dollar at the casino,' where first we meet him, in stark despair. Emerging from the casino, where he has lost all, Rafael is swept up by a crowd of merrymakers on their ways to feast and drink at the Palais Royal, and in his distraught condition he puts up little resistance to the flow of the crowd. After a night of Debauche—an experience highly familiar to Balzac himself—Rafael joins the world again, only to happen on a unique Curiosity Shop, run by a proprietor who appears to have gathered a broad assortment of the world's bizarre treasures. Among the remarkable items is a *peau de chagrin*, a wild ass' skin, which brings with it imaginary and occult powers, and the advice that its lucky possessor receives, including a sharp precaution. From that point on the character of Rafael will be closely tied up with the *peau de chagrin*. As

a possessor of the *peau* it will be Rafael's destiny, his character, to wax and wane with the powers and debilities of the *peau*. What he longs for he will get, but at a price—loss of happiness or health—which he cannot buy back. Rafael is what he becomes in possession of the magical *peau*.

**Parallels.** Goethe's Faust is an elder scholar who calls on the powers above, mostly diabolical, to restore his youth and vigor. And in doing so makes a diabolical pact, for which he will in the end pay heavily. From this kind of pact with the devil, as a trade in for some years of youthful vigor, for physical power and *joie de vivre*, Dr. Faustus gives up his hopes and claims on heaven.

The theme of *Faust* diffuses into a world-wide precautionary perception, of the inherent wisdom of self-limitation. In ancient Athens the word tag was *meden agan* (*nothing in excess*), in Rome it was *ne quid nimis*; in its Latin form the notion, and view point, became touchstones of literary (or pictorial) classicism, in the eighteenth century. The wisdom incorporated in this wisdom expression is the wisdom Dr. Faustus, for all his learning, failed to incorporate.

#### *Illustrative moments*

**Despondent.** When first we see Rafael he is entering a casino, welcomed by the hat check man, and moving over to the gambling tables. We can tell, by the way the others are eyeing him, that the young man, Rafael, is at the end of his rope. He approaches the croupier, makes his bet, and watches without emotion as he comes out empty handed. The reader of the text feels that the young man has reached a dead end, and wonders what can come next. The ominous moment is darkened further when we follow Rafael outside to the banks of the swirling river Seine. The young man peruses the waters, thinking.

**Captivated.** Having to all appearance rejected the notion of suicide, Rafael continues walking along the river bank until he comes to a highly original Curiosity Shop, into which he is warmly invited by the ingratiating shop owner. Entering, feeling the hands of fate at his steps, Rafael follows the proprietor through rooms heavy with rare botanical or mineral specimens, precious jewels and cloths from the Orient, wall designs and tapestries and, finally, lovingly fingered and proferred, a wild ass' skin. Under pressure, Rafael accepts this new possession.

**Bewildered.** Rafael has been warned, by the proprietor of the Curiosity Shop, that he should use the ass' skin with care. He must not misuse the powers of the skin, and remember that if he demands too much wish fulfillment from the skin he may pay for it. Though if he asks for nothing he will get nothing. In the midlife moment, in which Rafael finds himself, he has gained considerable wealth but his health is inexorably declining. He is literally torn between desire and decline, and reaches a crisis from which he cannot see how to break loose, is afraid to have desires, but non-existent without those desires.

**Destroyed.** Once again in a familiar setting he vows to abstain from all desire. (He has been horrified at the withered look of his face). At a friend's advice he decides to take the waters at Aix—a kind of break he needs. He enters his spa apartment when he hears a knock on the door. It is his old childhood flame, Pauline, who is deeply shocked by his exhausted appearance. After he briefly recounts his story, he realizes that he is talking himself into a powerful desire for her. Grasping his dilemma, Pauline tries to bolt the door that separates them. Rafael smashes through the door, seizes her in a love embrace, and dies.

#### *Discussion Questions*

1 Is *La Peau de Chagrin* a moral tale? If so, what moral point is it making?

2 What is Rafael's fatal weakness? Did he have the power to control desire? How did he try to do this and why did it not work?

## THEMES

**Desire: Gain vs. loss** As a young man of twenty he longed for pleasures and successes. Life put an opportunity for self-fulfillment directly in his way, in the form of the ass' skin, which the curiosity shop's owner offers him. Possession of the skin, which Raphael takes on himself, gives the young man the power to exercise his furthest ambitions, but at the same time to take the risk of destroying his well-being. We see that in the end the theme of this tragic dilemma becomes too much for Raphael, and kills him, depriving him of health and wealth. Desires, as wisdom literatures warn us throughout ancient talk, are almost impossible to control, for they feed on themselves, and preoccupy the central strength of the person. Lust, another kind of desire, is the only word for the passion unleashed in Raphael by the intense commiseration Paulina feels for him. That lust is fatal. The *Peau de Chagrin* is dominated by the theme of loss, which is the central penalty for excessive desire. To possess the 'skin' is to risk the biggest of losses, a fatal gratification. Raphael is no exception. He experiences gain and loss on the gambling table and as well as with the ass' skin and his health. Feodora is a gorgeous vamp, has a different type of greed, collecting men. Raphael is one of the victims of her rapacious personality. Her greed simply absorbs him. Lust is also one kind of the only word for the passion unleashed in Raphael by the intense commiseration Paulina feels for him. That lust is fatal. Rastignac, a would be man of the world, and confidant to Raphael, is eager to gain influence in Raphael's social circle. That is his private hope, which in many of the characters intersects with the gambler's hope, the eternal hope for a good throw of the dice. Raphael is also haunted by the fear that by giving free rein to his desires, which tempts him, he will lose his health and his wealth. His fear is justified.

**Self-discipline** The novel is pervaded by the theme of the difficulty of disciplining the desires. Not only can the satisfaction of desires enrich the individual, but it can leave the self-depleted, as in the feeling left in the individual who has finally gotten the longed for teddy bear or trip to Bahama and realizes that the satisfaction leaves behind it a flat sensation. Balzac trades boldly in fundamental patterns of psychology, but he can extract from them their extremes. Raphael slowly comes to realize that his longing is too much for him, and that he needs to keep his killing desires under control. (We do not track the precise timeline, by which the young man grows aware of his disastrous life bind, but we touch base from time to time, as circumstances demand. One of the most telling episodes of attempted self-mastery occurs at the point where Raphael has begun to realize the life threatening implications of the acceptance of the skin. At this point wealth has begun to accrue, and the protagonist has retired to his private country home, to distance himself from too much contact with the potentially desirable world. He has made many provisions to reduce his life exposure. His only company is his manservant, who prepares him simple meals, sets a neat and simple table, and sees to the spartan simplicity of daily life in the mountains. We will easily observe that, between this interlude and the oncoming intervention of Pauline, into what become Raphael's last days, the world has come crashing in. Balzac brings us, here, to the point where we realize how delicate is the balance that separates neutral existence, the condition of non-desire, from longing. It is worth noting that the theme Balzac is brushing, here, is one that resembles self-disciplinary issues central to Asian religions like Buddhism. The same pointer could be directed to the parallels between Raphael's mind drama and the themes of withdrawal and non- participation in Asian thought.

**Myth** Balzac is frequently spoken of as a realist, as are those contemporaries—Flaubert, Hugo, de Stael—who join him in describing real persons in real circumstances, For all the looseness here, about just what the real means, we can agree that the term describes a sharp break between nineteenth century literature and the fictions that dominate pre Napoleonic western European literature. (Classicized traditions, formal euphonies, and stock settings—think *Paul et Virginie* or Rousseau's self-descriptive literary strategies —met audience and reader tastes which were on the whole up for entertainment rather than discovery. Among the literary moves made available by and for constructing Romanticism the return to myth seemed a surprisingly effective way to re-establish the new. It is one of the ploys available for constructing the modern man as deconstructed, the literary figure in search of a character to embody him. Raphael, awaiting events to establish him, becomes the possibility remaining to man, to be a vehicle of grandeur, without himself being grand.

## Discussion questions

What makes the bargain of the Peau de Chagrin so difficult to deal with? Is it the clash set up in the bargain between desire and dread? Is there any 'reasonable' way to deal with the conflict? How about retreat to a monastery? Or would that be an even more irresistible invitation to desire?

Why does Balzac not immerse us in the details of health loss in Raphael? Why no portrayals of the gradual inroads of the skin's retribution? Is it that Balzac wants to preserve the broad lines of his fairytale, rather than to draw the reader into minutiae? Is Balzac working the same territory as Oscar Wilde, in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*?

What do you think of the realism of Balzac the novelist? Does Balzac seem to you rather a philosophical or fantastic novelist?

How does Balzac establish Character? Does he enter into details of appearance, dress, action? Or does he satisfy himself with broad general features?